

# **GENERAL SIR THOMAS WILLIAM BROTHERTON G.C.B.**

**by Richard Haynes**

One winter's day, towards the end of January 1868, a solemn funeral procession might have been seen wending its way along the Portsmouth Road from the direction of Esher, until it eventually came to a halt at St. Andrew's Church, Cobham. No doubt most of the mourners were suitably dressed in sombre tones, and probably the horses drawing the hearse were draped in black, as was the custom in Victorian times. But it is certain that this particular funeral was not all grey and drab. On this occasion there would have been seen, on foot, on horseback and in some of the carriages, a splash of colour, the reflected gleam from medals and decorations, and the bright reds and blues of army uniforms.

We know this because there was a witness, a young schoolboy who, together with his brother, had been hurriedly recalled from Eton by the family so that they could pay their last respects to their grandfather. Long afterwards that boy, when he had grown to manhood, recorded his memories of that eventful day. It was the sort of scene which would stand out in all its detail in the mind of a boy. For a blood relation, the patriarch of the family, and a public figure of the first magnitude, was being laid to rest. No less a person, indeed, than General Sir Thomas William Brotherton G.C.B., Aide-de-Camp to King William the IV, veteran of the Napoleonic wars, and one of the most distinguished military men of his day. These facts have recently come to light by a fortunate chance, through which I was enabled to meet a direct descendant of the General, his great-great-grandson, Mr. Julian Brotherton, who was kind enough to let me have access to a fascinating collection of papers connected with the Brotherton family history.

The house from which the General set out on his last journey to Cobham churchyard was built in 1846 and was called "The Firs". He had purchased 16 acres of ground as a setting for the mansion, which was presented as a wedding gift to his son, John William Brotherton, on his marriage. It may still be seen today, almost bisected by the Esher By-Pass. It has appeared in the headlines of the press lately under the new name of "Upper Court", there having been a number of changes in ownership since the turn of the century, and in 1921/22 for some reason "The Firs - Spa Bottom", ceased to be used. It was known as Upper Court when David Lloyd George briefly leased the house for about a year in 1921.

## **A Hero of the Peninsula**

General Sir Thomas W. Brotherton was born in 1785. His parents, William and Mary Brotherton (nee Scott), spent much of their lives abroad, especially in France, and little is known about them. In his old age the General used to tell the story of how, when he was a boy of 8 or 9, his father was arrested in Paris at the height of the French Revolution, and sentenced to the guillotine because he had been discovered harbouring a refugee. He said that his father's life had only been saved because Robespierre, who had ordered the arrest, was himself in 1794 a victim of the guillotine before anything could be done.

But it seems that the young Thomas Brotherton was attracted by the kind of life the army had to offer, and so it could not have come as a surprise to his family when, at the tender age of 15, he enlisted in the Coldstream Guards as an ensign. However, there may have been some parental misgiving when, within weeks he was posted to active duty overseas.

It was to be the prelude to fifteen years packed with incident. There could not have been many days during this period without something of note occurring. In his old age he must frequently have been

asked to recount his memories, and, it seems he was under constant pressure from his children and his grandchildren to put it all down in writing. In 1861 quite evidently they succeeded in cornering the old gentlemen - at last they had the satisfaction of seeing him sit down at his desk, dip his pen in the inkwell and proceed to dash off the reminiscences of his early life. However, this could not have been exactly what they had been expecting or hoping for. It is soldierly, terse, and to the point. He has no time for romantic stories. On four pages of ordinary notepaper he sums up all that he considers worth the telling, and he allows no digression to creep in, except for an expression of regret as what he sees as a change of heart in the young people of the 1860s in regard to the quest for military glory. He calls it an autobiography, but it surely must be one of the briefest ever written, and perhaps later, less distinguished men would have done well to have taken it as a model when they felt moved to give the world their personal histories.

Nevertheless we can share the sense of exasperation it must have aroused in the breasts of those for whom it was produced. This is bare bones without any flesh. How much more satisfying it would have been if he had permitted himself a little padding on the human side of life - about the people he had met and how they lived when he was young, and if he had clothed the stark outlines with comments on things observed. Still, even if he chooses to remain in his full dress military uniform while he writes this little sketch, one feels, somehow, that it is typical of the man. The last page completed it is almost possible to hear him growl, with a sigh of relief, "There you are, that's what you wanted, *now* will you leave me in peace!"

On the cover, in a broad, sloping hand, the document is prefaced:

***The Autobiography of General Sir. T. Wm. Brotherton G.C.B.***

Dedicated To His Children & Grandchildren. Written at their particular request, July 16th 1861.

The three pages which follow appear to have flowed off his pen without any great effort; it must have been a condensed form of a familiar chronicle which, perhaps, by the time these words were written he had become slightly weary of telling:

"I commenced my military career in very early life in the Coldstream Guards, having entered that corps as an Ensign on the 24th of January 1800. Almost immediately after I accompanied the regiment to Egypt in the expedition under Sir Ralph Abercrombie to expel the French army from that country. This army was the "elite" of the French troops, and was the same with which Bonaparte had gained his brilliant victories over the Austrians in Italy.

England perhaps never performed a more brilliant feat of arms than this campaign. The landing in Aboukir Bay, in the face of the enemy prepared on the water's edge to resist the disembarkation - our advance opposed in three successive battles, viz. on the 8th, 13th & 21st of March, and the subsequent surrender and capture of the whole French army are facts which speak for themselves.

I had left England in a very weak and sickly state consequent upon a bad fever, and the medical advice was to the effect that I was not fit at the time to join my regiment; but, of course, I was eager to go, and in those days, somehow or other, there was a stronger feeling and impulse for military glory and *Duty* than seems to exist in these times. I was an only son of fond parents - yet they both joined in approving of my departure, though much depended on my reaching the age of *twenty one*, as the family estates were entailed on the male line & my cousin Bro. Browne would, in case of my dying before that age, have inherited them, to the exclusion of my sisters.

I was, however, so weak that I was taken down to Gravesend and carried on board in a blanket in my father's arms. I recovered rapidly at sea - though suffered much from rough weather in the Bay of Biscay. Stopped at Gibraltar, Minorca, Malta & the Isle of Crete/Candia on the voyage. The landing in Egypt is a matter of history."

If, as we can infer from his own account, it was as a boy that Thomas Brotherton first felt called to face the hazards and hardships of army life, and had dreams of winning martial renown, then certainly the fates were in a co-operative mood. He did not have to wait long. Europe was going through one of its periodic blood baths in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789, and indeed by 1800 almost the entire continent had become embroiled in the conflict, including Spain and Portugal, and it was in the Peninsula that he served for six years between 1808 and 1814. They were bitter and terrible years for the civilian population who suffered the concomitants of war, slaughter, famine and the destruction of their homes as the armies moved through the country - the scenes which we can still see today so vividly depicted in the paintings of Goya. Thomas Brotherton must have seen all this at first hand. He himself was twice wounded in these campaigns, the second time seriously, and he was with Sir John Moore in his famous retreat from Corunna in 1809.

### **After the War**

With the final overthrow of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815, the British army resumed its peacetime role. By that time Thomas W. Brotherton had risen to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and in 1830 he was appointed A.D.C. to the King; he rose to Major General in 1844, and the confidence of the government of the day in his abilities was shown by his being appointed Commander of the troops in London in 1848 when the Chartist demonstrations were expected to develop into bloodshed and rioting. By 1860 he had become a full General.

This cryptic summary of his career does not, however, reveal much about the man himself, and luckily one of his grandsons, Thomas de la Haye Brotherton took the trouble to record some personal anecdotes about the General, many of which deal with life at "The Firs" at Esher. These show an individual of strong character, kindly, sometimes a little eccentric, and with surprising talents quite outside his military pre-occupations. I quote a passage which well illustrates this:

"A somewhat peppery man, he had various little quarrels, and ended, when nearly 80, by challenging Lord Lucan to a duel. This never came off, as his adversary failed to put in an appearance at the rendezvous near Paris. Whatever his temper, he was evidently held in genuine affection by his friends, as testified by their letters to him, notably by those from Sir W. Napier, the well known historian of the Peninsula war, and that he was beloved by his subordinates is also shown by other letters. He evidently was so straight himself that he hated the crooked ways of others. One of his betes noires was Lord Cardigan. He was kindness itself to his grandchildren, and gave his two grandsons the free run of a sweetshop, near his house at 11, Upper Brook Street, when we went to visit him as small boys. He had been a well known figure in town, and at the United Services Club, and being a bit of dandy, it was rather sporting of him on one occasion to wager that he would carry a butcher's tray of meat down Bond Street in full town dress, and ask all the friends that he met to dinner that night. It is said that 18 guests sat down to table.

He was also a famous violinist, and has left two good instruments. An incident relating to one of these violins is worth recording. My brother used to play a little, and was one day travelling north, with the violin in the rack overhead. An elderly man in the compartment, observing the case, said, "I only heard a violin really well played in a drawing room, and that was by General Brotherton". My brother replied, "I am his grandson, and that is the violin you heard".

The domestic life of the General was not entirely untroubled. He was left early a widower, and in his last years there was a surprising denouement. He married, in 1819, the beautiful, though frail, Louisa Straton, daughter of General and Lady Straton, and granddaughter of the 1st Earl of Roden. She died in 1847, at the age of 44, having been married at 16. When almost in his dotage, the old General was captured by a designing woman, Thomasina, daughter of the Rev. Walter Hare, who married him for his position, and then treated him so abominably that he fled to his son's house at Esher, to end his days in peace. It was there that I chiefly recollect him, being wheeled about by his faithful man, Barnes. I well recollect being summoned one day, from Eton, to attend the dear old veteran's funeral, and how impressed we boys were by half a troop of Dragoons, sent to represent his old regiment. His monument over the family vault is at Cobham Church, near the south door."

### **The Problem**

It is this reference to a "monument" and to a "family vault" which present a puzzle. It would not be unreasonable to assume that a person of the General's eminence would have a final resting place which could be easily found. But a search, carried out with the help of the verger, Mr. Cunningham, in the vicinity of the south door, both inside and outside the church, failed to find any trace of a monument or a family vault; nor, indeed did there seem to be any mention of the General's name amongst the various memorial tablets on the walls, and the vicar, the Rev. S.E.B. Barrington, confirmed that, as far as he was aware, there were no family vaults of any kind inside the church.

Perhaps the solution to this problem may lie in a survey, carried out nearly 40 years ago by Mr. T.E. Conway Walker of all the gravestones in St. Andrew's churchyard. Mr. Walker, who is the recognised authority on Cobham history, listed in 1938 among his findings, a white stone cross not far from the south door bearing the inscription only of the General's son, John William Brotherton, who died in September 1878. Could a family vault have existed at one time on this site? And what has happened to the monument?

John William Brotherton was born in 1821. "The Firs" was given to him and his bride as a wedding present in 1846 by the General. Rather sadly, he was never able to enjoy the house and grounds to the full because of ill health. Following in what was by then a great tradition, he joined the army but had to resign his commission in 1842 after an accident in a riding school in which he sustained brain damage which left him a semi-invalid for the rest of his life. He married Georgina Palmer, a remarkable woman who was born in Ayr but received most of her education in Geneva. She was a fluent French speaker, and travelled widely on the continent. It so happened that she reached Paris on the very day that the Revolution of 1830 broke out, and she remembered the muzzles of the soldiers' muskets being pushed through the windows of the coach on their arrival at the city gates. It was then turned over to form part of a barricade. She brought up six children at The Firs, and her son recollected her as being a "wonderfully strong woman all her life - I have known her, when my father's health was beginning to fail, to lift him up and carry him upstairs...". She lived on to the age of 93, having died on November 16th 1916. It is interesting to note that, in an age when the average expectation of life was less than it is now, the lives of the General and his daughter-in-law added up to 177 years, spanning 3 centuries, and stretching from the reign of George III to that of George V.

By that time the Brothertons had moved elsewhere, and "The Firs" had passed into other hands. The funeral cortege which had set out for Cobham in 1868 was a distant and half-forgotten event. And even at the time, there could not have been many of the General's army colleagues surviving. He had outlived nearly all his contemporaries. His old friend and late Commander in Chief, the Duke of Wellington, had died 16 years before, in 1852, and more than half a century had elapsed since the guns fell silent on the field of Waterloo. He had not been present at this battle, his regiment having been partly in America at the time; this, together with his never having been in India, were sore

points with him. But to the end of his life he kept a marble bust of the Iron Duke at "The Firs" - one which he had exchanged with Wellington for a statuette of Napoleon. I am indebted to another descendant of the General's, Mrs. I.J. Pullin, now in her 81st year, and living in Dartmouth, for information on the whereabouts of this bust which came into her possession. It is now to be found in the museum at Basingstoke - a suitable resting place, near Stratfield Saye, the Wellington country seat.

As these words are written there is much speculation regarding the future of Upper Court. There is talk of a Casino, an Arabian Palace, and who knows what else....enough, one might think, to make the old General turn in his grave - wherever he may be resting!

Sources and authorities consulted, notes and an 1895 sketch of "The Firs" can be seen on the original Monograph.

Monograph published  
4 February 1978